

an unexpected party by TolkienGirl

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Friendship

Language: English

Characters: Dustin H., Lucas S., Steve H.

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-10-31 14:15:29

Updated: 2017-10-31 14:15:29

Packaged: 2019-12-17 04:39:01

Rating: K+

Chapters: 1

Words: 1,688

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Steve doesn't have plans for his birthday. Dustin isn't about to let that slide. (Post S2; fluff & angst; gen with some slight Lumax, one-sided Dumax, and one-sided Stancy).

an unexpected party

Max has never read *The Hobbit*. This is a travesty that it takes them till the end of the schoolyear to discover, which is pretty embarrassing. Or pretty great, if you ask Lucas, which Dustin doesn't.

"This is what we can do this summer!" Lucas exclaims, eyes wide with excitement. "We can have campfires and read it to her!"

Mike rolls his eyes, and it's not like they all don't already know: Mike is going to be sneaking off to Cabin Hopper as often as he can. Dustin feels a little pang, at that, but it's not as sharp as the one that still comes when Max and Lucas start staring into each other's eyes.

At least, Dustin consoles himself, Steve's in the same boat. The Hawkins high-school rumor mill moves on, and everybody thinks Steve's sleeping with Stacy Mitchell, but Dustin knows Steve. Dustin knows there hasn't been anybody since Nancy.

And for Dustin, *still*, there isn't anybody since Max.

At least there's nobility in sharing in the tragedies of Steve Harrington.

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"You read it," Lucas says. "My voice gets weird!"

"Dude, my voice is weird," Dustin protests, in the same stage whisper. Max is waiting patiently, legs crossed and elbows on her knees, and Dustin clears his throat.

Mike is nowhere to be seen. Will is somewhere with Jonathan. It feels like the Fellowship is broken. This isn't how summer should begin.

"In a hole in the ground, there lived a hobbit..."

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Dustin finds Steve at the post office. It isn't stalking if you do it in public, Dustin assures himself, and anyway, he and Steve are friends

now. It isn't stalking at all.

He pauses on the concrete steps, taking in the image of Steve Harrington picking up mail. Stooping to such a pedestrian activity doesn't seem like something Steve Harrington would do, but Dustin's seen Steve's face mashed to a pulp and covered with superhero band-aids, so maybe a stack of envelopes isn't such a stretch.

"What's in the box?" he asks, and Steve jumps three inches.

"Holy sh—dude."

"Sorry to startle you."

Steve scrapes a hand through the Hair. Dustin's given up on achieving it. The Snowball was a death-knell, and he's resigned himself to his curls ever since. "It's my graduation stuff," he says.

Dustin beams. "Right! You're graduating! Next weekend, right?"

"Yeah." Steve keeps his pace a little slower, so Dustin can fall into step beside him. "Don't you have mail?"

"Nah. I just saw you through the window," Dustin says, too honestly. Steve's lip quirks up a little bit, but he doesn't tease.

"Want a ride home?"

"Yeah."

They stop for milkshakes. Steve holds his between his knees and rips open the box. Dustin cranes his neck, but all he can see is a whole lot of polyester.

Steve wrinkles his nose. "Great. This is going to look great."

"At least everyone will look the same," Dustin says, comfortingly.

"Happy birthday to me." Steve sighs.

Dustin's jaw drops. "Wait. Is it your birthday?"

"Tomorrow. Why?" Steve lifts an eyebrow with the kind of

nonchalance that other people (Dustin) would kill for.

"Dude, you didn't tell us?" After all they've been through, Dustin thinks, that's pretty rich. Hell, Steve's taking all of them to see *Back to the Future* in a few weeks. He's come to every single birthday party that's happened in the past six months. And he couldn't be bothered to give them advance notice?

Steve shrugs. He does kind of a full-body shrug, it's an expression and a ripple of his shoulders and Dustin could swear that the Hair shrugs too. "Didn't seem like a big deal, man."

Dustin sputters. "W-well, it is! Birthday *and* graduation in the same month?"

Steve slurps his milkshake, taps the wheel with his free hand, and says, "Kind of a...anti-climate—"

"Anticlimax?" Dustin interjects, to save him.

"Yeah, that."

Dustin finishes milkshake so fast he gets brain freeze. Maybe it'll help him think. "What'd you do last year?"

The Nancy-look passes over Steve's face. Dustin recognizes it because he's got a pretty similar Max-look whenever she and Lucas walk away.

"Oh," Dustin says, "Sorry. Forgot."

"Chill out, it's no big deal." Steve's keeping his eyes on the road. "We just went to my parents' lake-house, is all."

A lake-house. It's hard not to be envious of the guy who had everything, even if he doesn't have it anymore.

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"We should do it at my house."

"Do what at your house?" Max asks. Lucas says, "What the hell, man?"

We're almost to the goblins. Why'd you stop reading?"

"Steve's party," Dustin says, marking the place in the chapter with a finger. "His birthday is today, and Saturday is tomorrow, and my mom already said she'd bake a cake—"

"Hold up, hold up." Lucas actually holds up his hands. "I know he's been...cool, but do you really think Steve friggin' Harrington is going to have a birthday party with us? We're nerds."

"We saved the world together!"

"We're still nerds!"

"I don't think Steve minds, though," Max muses, picking at a knot in her shoelace. "I think he'd like it."

Lucas's expression sours. "Do you like him?"

Max grins impishly. "Maybe." But she winks at Lucas, and Lucas gets all embarrassed, and Dustin has to silently count to ten to make the ache go away.

"Will you guys come? Please?"

"Yeah. I bet Will'll come too. And as for Wheeler..." Lucas shakes his head.

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In the end, Mike comes. He's been banned from Cabin Hopper for a week, because he and El snuck out or something. He's very glum about it, but also says that El manages to keep in touch.

"We know," Lucas says. "We talk to her too."

The year is halfway gone.

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"Dusty! The streamers!"

"Oh my God, Mom! I told you we needed more tape!"

She throws up her hands—well, one hand, as the other has Tews tucked firmly against her. "Honey-bunch, I was too busy with the three different kinds of ice cream!"

Dustin blows her a forgiving kiss and returns to his ministrations with the streamers. Everything has to be perfect.

Lucas and Max show up together, but Will is with them. Mike trails in later.

"Do you have it?"

"Yeah, duh."

Dustin hears Steve's car outside, and they all freeze.

"Hide!"

Steve thinks he's driving Dustin to the arcade because Dustin's bike blew a tire. Steve has no idea. Dustin really hopes this works.

Steve knocks twice, and Dustin answers in as dignified a manner as he can.

"You ready to go?" Steve asks, flipping his keys in his hand.

"Go!" Dustin yells. They all jump out with tremendous shrieks, which of course scares the shit out of Steve, only he can't say so because Mrs. Henderson is standing right there. He scratches the back of his head and stares. Dustin flings open the door and pulls Steve inside so that he can see the decorations. The sign is a little lopsided, but it definitely says *Happy Birthday, Steve*. Will did the drawings, and they look good.

There's a moment's pause.

Dustin digs his nails into his palms till it hurts, which means he's pressing pretty hard. His nails are always bitten to the nub. "Do you like it?"

Steve's face is still unreadable. It's like he doesn't have a snappy comeback, like he doesn't know what to say at all.

Then he smiles, and reaches out to punch Dustin lightly on the shoulder. "Wow. You planned this?"

"We all did," Mike says pointedly, like he didn't sit around moping about El most of the time.

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Steve has two helpings of ice cream.

"OK," Dustin says, trying to conceal his eagerness. "Now, presents."

They give him a homemade ticket to the arcade, which Dustin knows is really more a present to themselves (if they can get him to go), new sunglasses (Max promised they were cool, and Steve puts them on at once), and then Mike hands him a lumpy bag, but only when Mrs. Henderson has gone into the kitchen.

"This is from all of us," Dustin whispers.

Steve surveys them with a skeptical glance. "It's not...alive, is it? I've had enough of your shitty pets, dude."

"No, no!" Dustin shakes his head firmly.

"Careful, though," Max says, when Steve reaches into the bag.

He pulls out one of the things and stares at it. "What the..."

"They're baseball grenades," Lucas explains. "They go with your bat."

"They don't blow up, though," Will says, a bit regretfully.

"You just wham at people and the nails stick in 'em." Dustin mimes a throw.

"And by people, he means monsters," Mike hastens to amend, so that Steve doesn't think that they've gone truly homicidal behind his back. Steve is very particular about their extra-curriculars.

"How many of these are there?" Steve demands, peering into the bag. But Dustin's almost sure that he sees Steve mouth, *awesome*, so he's

satisfied.

"Six." Mike smiles the secret Eleven-smile. "El made one too. Hers is the best, though, 'cause she did it with her mind so all the points are outwards."

"Damn," says Steve. "That's pretty cool."

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"Your tire's fine, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Dustin grins. "Hope you didn't have anything else planned for today."

Steve leans against his car, tips his head back so that the wind catches his hair and tousles it a little. He looks like a hero. Maybe Dustin should give the Farrah Fawcett spray another shot. "Nah," Steve says. "This was better."

And Dustin doesn't feel the ache at all.